

Cuyahoga Valley

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cuyahoga Valley National Park
Brecksville, Ohio



Great Blue Herons

Photo by Tom Jones



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The great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) is an impressive and increasingly common sight in the Cuyahoga Valley. The recent establishment of nesting colonies in the valley is a reflection of favorable habitat created by beavers, along with protection of the valley by the National Park Service, Cleveland Metroparks, the City of Akron, and other organizations and individuals. Use this site bulletin to find the best places to observe great blue herons and as a natural history guide.

Physical Features and Distribution

Great blue herons are the largest heron found in the continental United States, in many parts of Canada, and along the coastal areas of Alaska. They stand four feet tall, weigh slightly over four pounds, and have a wingspan of

nearly seven feet. These herons are generally seen in wetlands while nesting or when feeding on small fish, amphibians, and a variety of aquatic invertebrates.

Nest Selection

Depending on the severity of the winter, males usually start returning to the nesting areas in early February to claim their nest. Two to three weeks later the females arrive and seasonal

monogamous pair bonds are established. Both the male and female share in nest building and caring for the young.

Nest Colonies

They nest in colonies, called heronries. Nests are typically in 30-70 foot high trees surrounded by water. The first record of nesting great blue herons in the Cuyahoga Valley occurred in 1985 with the discovery of a nesting pair in the Pinery Narrows.

Currently, there are two active heronries in the Cuyahoga Valley. Both the Bath Road heronry (located on Bath Road between Akron-Peninsula and Riverview Roads) and the Pinery Narrows heronry (located on the west side of the Cuyahoga River, 1 mile north of the

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Station Road Bridge Trailhead) are great places

to observe the herons. Look for stick nests high in the trees.

Nest building is a wonderful time to observe the heron flying to nest with sticks. A male will gather a stick, present it to the female who takes the stick and then adds it to the nest,

strengthening the pair bond. Later the inside of the nest will be lined with fine twigs and leaves. Great blue herons are known to use nests from the previous years in a heronry, although it is still not known if the same individuals use the same nests each year.

Incubation and Fledgling Development

After courtship and mating, three to seven eggs are laid over a few days, and then are incubated for approximately 28 days. The eggs are rolled every few hours so heat is evenly distributed to the developing embryo. Hatching occurs over

the span of a few days, typically in late April or early May. Young birds can be seen in the nest from late May until they fledge in July or early August.

Seasonal Distribution

The migration patterns of the great blue heron in Ohio are extremely variable. Some birds travel to the Gulf States. Others fly just one or two states south. The remainder stay

throughout the year. Birds remaining through the winter feed along the Cuyahoga River, and often use the heronries as roosting areas.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) protects 33,000 acres along the Cuyahoga River between Cleveland and Akron, Ohio. Managed by the National Park Service, CVNP combines cultural, historical, recreational, and natural activities in one setting. For more information call (216) 524-1497 or (800) 445-9667 or visit www.nps.gov/cuva or www.dayinthevalley.com.



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